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ABSTRACT

Walter Carlton (1978) has suggested that the most prominent characteristic of contemporary rhetorical theory is its attempt to bring into focus the relationship between knowledge and discourse. The concern with establishing the epistemic status of discourse is not, however, limited to rhetoric. Similar questions dominate much contemporary theorizing in literary criticism and philosophy. At stake in all three disciplines is nothing less than the potential redefinition of the goals, methods, scope, and validity of these humanistic enterprises. The last 30 years have witnessed a number of efforts to both revive and define the discipline of rhetoric, to create, in effect, a new rhetoric. The proponents of the new rhetoric attempt either to characterize their discipline by opposing it to classical rhetoric or to clarify its nature, scope, and goals by investigating its epistemic status. Studies in the historical relationship between rhetoric and philosophy, and the nature of philosophical argument--in addition to contemporary strategies--can bring together the new rhetoric, philosophy, literary criticism, linguistics, and other disciplines in a revitalizing, interdisciplinary approach to the study of the nature of language. (CRH)

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Philosophy, Rhetoric, and the New Rhetoric *

As Walter M. Carlton noted in his 1978 QJS article, "What is Rhetorical Knowledge," "Perhaps the most prominent characteristic of contemporary rhetorical theory is its attempt to bring into focus the relationship between knowledge and discourse."[1] This concern with establishing the epistemic status of discourse is not, of course, limited to rhetoric. Similar questions dominate much contemporary theorizing in literary criticism and philosophy. At stake in all three disciplines--as those who are able and energetic enough to keep up with the dizzying number of articles and books realize--is nothing less than the potential redefinition of the goals, methods, scope, and validity of these humanistic enterprises.

The last thirty years or so--a period inaugurated by the publication of Burke's Philosophy of Literary Form (1941), Grammar of Motives (1945), and Rhetoric of Motives (1950). of Richard's Philosophy of Rhetoric (1956) and of Fogarty's Roots for a New Rhetoric (1959)-have indeed witnessed a number of efforts to both revive and redefine the discipline of rhetoric, to create, in effect, a new rhetoric. Broadly speaking, proponents of a new rhetoric have attempted to characterize their discipline through one of two main strategies. Some have sought to describe this new rhetoric largely in terms of its opposition to classical rhetoric. As Andrea Lunsford and I have argued recently, this strategy not only falsely stereotypes classical rhetoric but also obscures important

*This essay is dedicated to Sharon Bassett, my colleague and friend, who first started me down this road.

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potential connections between rhetoric and other contemporary discourse studies.[2] A second and, in my view, more fruitful approach has attempted to clarify the new rhetoric's nature, scope, and goals by investigating its epistemic status.

This investigation has taken a number of forms. Some scholars, such as Scott, Cherwitz, Carlton, and Farrell, have focused fairly straightforwardly on the nature of discourse and of rhetorical knowledge.[3] These scholars consider such questions as the role language plays in the creation of reality and of the self, the relationship between rhetorical and other kinds of knowledge (such as scientific knowledge), and the ethical implications of what might be called the rhetoric as epistemic stance. In my own efforst to formulate an answer to what can seem to be a deceptively simple question--is rhetoric epistemic and, if so, what precisely does that mean?--I have found these analyses to be stimulating, enlightening, and, in their perhaps inevitable abstractness, also at times frustratingly vague and slippery.

Another group of scholars attempt to validate rhetoric's epistemic status by demonstrating how the tenets of a particular philosopher or philosophical system, in redefining the nature of language, the self, and reality, either implies or articulates an enlarged conception of rhetoric's role and powers. Barry Brunnet's 1976 P&R article on "Some Implications of 'Process' or 'Intersubjectivity': Postmodern Rhetoric," follows this strategy, as do recent essays on the implications of hermeneutics on rhetoric by Sloan, Campbell, and Hawes.[4] Their understanding of the potentially powerful impact of recent continental philosophies on rhetoric is extremely useful. But unless one comes to these essays with a strong philosophical background, particularly in the impact of this tradition on rhetoric, the force of these arguments can be weakened. As a consequence, they can seem less like revisionings of a new rhetoric and more like polemics

in support of this or that philosophy or philosopher.

I lack the time today fully to review all the approaches scholars have employed in their efforts to clarify rhetoric's epistemic status. I have omitted, for instance, important contributions centering around the concept of the rhetorical situation.[5] I have not discussed the view, advocated by Johannesen, Poulakos, Stewart, and others, that genuine communication, and hence rhetoric, is dialogic.[6] Nor have I noted--and this seems the greatest omission--the major contributions of Burke, forefather of us all. But even this brief journey through contemporary theoretical research on rhetoric may give you some idea why, as I have attempted to make sense of these quite diverse research efforts and to formulate my own position about rhetoric's epistemic status, I have often felt more than a little like Middlemarch's Mr. Casaubon, hunting fruitlessly for his Key to All Mythologies.

At least some of this frustration is probably both inevitable and necessary. It is the price we pay, in effect, for the fertility of contemporary rhetorical theory. It also represents an exciting challenge, the opportunity to create a broad interdisciplinary base, not just for rhetoric, but for discourse studies in general. (I am reminded here of a traditional and very sly Chinese curse: "May you live in interesting times.") I have found, however, that two other related approaches to the question of rhetoric's epistemic status--investigations of the historical relationship between philosophy and rhetoric and of the nature and status of philosophical argumentation--have helped me to cut through some of these complexities, to better determine the essential issues in this debate. In the time left to me I hope to share some of my still very tentative conclusions about this research with you.

Thanks to the efforts of a number of scholars, such as Ijsseling, Grassi, and Florescu, the historical relationship between philosophy and rhetoric, and its negative impact on rhetoric, has been clearly charted.[6a] It would not be appropriate for me to rehearse this history, which began with Plato's denunciation of rhetoric as mere cookery, here.[7] But I would like to note a particularly critical juncture: Descarte's effort to construct a self-evident, neutral, and systematic framework for philosophical inquiry, to reason more geometrico. The following statement from the Discourse on Method provides just one of many examples of Descarte's anti-rhetorical bias: "Every time that two men speaking of one and the same thing put forth opposite judgments, it is certain that one of them is wrong; and, what is more, neither knows the truth, for if one of them had a clear and distinct opinion, he would know how to express it in a way that would eventually force others to agree."[8]

Descartes here says, quite simply, that rhetoric can not and never could be epistemic. For Descartes, there is no relationship between knowledge and discourse except that, regrettably, philosophers must use language to convey their ideas. Descarte's view is not unique; he only states more clearly what many philosophers before and after him have either assumed or argued. For, as Richard Rorty notes in The Linguistic Turn: Recent Essays in Philosophical Method, the history of mainstream philosophy can best be characterized "by revolts against the practices of previous philosophers and by attempts to transform philosophy into a science--a discipline in which universally recognized decision-procedures are available for testing philosophical theses . . . . In all of these revolts, the aim of the revolutionary [has been] to replace opinion with knowledge, and to propose as the proper meaning of philosophy the accomplishment of some finite task by applying a certain set of methodological directions."[9]

Historical research on the relationship between rhetoric and philosophy is useful, then, because it describes in clear and compelling detail the reasons why, given the history of western culture, the status of rhetoric is inextricably linked to that of philosophy. More importantly, this research also provides important clues about the form that what we must still call the debate between rhetoric and philosophy must take. Rhetoricians can, should, and generally do address such typically philosophical questions as the nature of language, of being, and of knowledge. But unless they challenge other assumptions--that the goal of philosophy is to establish self-evident principles, that philosophers should attempt to articulate a systematic, neutral description of reality--their endeavors will be, if not futile, then only partially satisfactory. A revolutionary and revitalized new rhetoric cannot be fully realized, then, apart from a revolutionary and revitalized philosophy.[10]

Chaim Perelman and Henry Johnstone, Jr. both address the nature of the connection between rhetoric and philosophy explicitly in their works. They, as well as Stephen Toulmin (who seldom refers to rhetoric specifically, but has nevertheless significantly influenced our discipline) ask variants of a single question: to what degree is philosophical discourse priviliged? What is the nature and status of philosophical argumentation. As might be expected, both their methods and their answers vary significantly.

Of the three, Johnstone clearly has the narrowest focus, for he is concerned solely with the nature of philosophical argumentation. This limited focus deepens, rather than weakens, his analysis, however. Although Johnstone has written a number of useful studies, his 1978 collection of essays, Validity and Rhetoric in Philosophical Argument, most clearly represents his ideas.

This collection is subtitled An Outlook in Transition--and for good reason. For during the twenty-five years these essays cover, Johnstone radically changed his views, moving from the position that there is no connection between rhetoric and philosophy to his current view, that rhetoric plays an essential role in philosophical argumentation and that "without it there can be no consciousness of fact or value, and hence no human experience at all. Rhetoric is necessary to man, and is unnecessary only if man is unnecessary"(VRPA, p. 133).[11]

Equally important are the radical changes in Johnstone's view of philosophy which have accompanied this transformation. Johnstone has come to realize that his original search for objective formal standards of validity in philosophical argument was misguided. Philosophy, he now realizes, is not propositional, not fact-generating, but "evocative;" it is "the articulation of morale"(VRPA, p. 69). And validity "enters our understanding of the arguments of philosophers not as an objective property of these arguments but as a regulative ideal"(VRPA, p. 135). For me, the lucidity of Johnstone's analysis--and its integrity, for he has not hesitated to challenge, and finally revise, his most strongly held assumptions--have made his work not only compelling but inspiring. As Carlton noted in a critique of Johnstone: "Johnstone's work is important not only because he provides the reader with a rational way of moving from one philosophical position to the next, but because, like Wittgenstein, he once held the view he now argues against. Johnstone's work thus offers a sequence of arguments whose examination reveals the method by which philosophy's relation to rhetoric has been transformed."[12]

Whereas Johnstone began his 25 year investigation of philosophy and rhetoric in agreement with traditional definitions of philosophy's scope and methods,

Toulmin and Perelman began their studies from a much more critical perspective. The following statement from the introduction to Toulmin's Human Understanding, for instance, is remarkably similar to numerous assertions made by Perelman in The New Rhetoric and elsewhere. In this introduction, Toulmin describes the "deep conviction" that has motivated all his work since his 1958 Uses of Argument, that "our exclusive preoccupation with logical systematicity has been destructive of both historical understanding and rational criticism."[13] Perhaps because of this shared conviction, Toulmin and Perelman each have "projects" in a way that Johnstone--more content to follow where his ideas lead him--does not. Both also look to jurisprudence, rather than to formal logic, as the most appropriate model for informal reasoning.

Of the two, Perelman's enterprise is, of course, more specifically rhetorical, as both the title of The New Rhetoric and its central thesis--that "it is in terms of an audience that argumentation develops"(NR, p. 5)[14]--clearly indicate. And Perelman's detailed analysis of "The Starting Point of Argument" and, especially, of "Techniques of Argumentation" do constitute a rich and complex "study of the methods used to gain adherence"(NR, p. 10). It is not so clear, however, that Perelman is successful in his ambitious effort to, as he says, effect "a break with a concept of reason and reasoning due to Descartes which has set its mark on Western philosophy for the last three centuries"(NR, p. 1)--is able, in other words, to free himself from rationalist assumptions about the nature of knowledge, assumptions which implicitly compromise his effort to grant rhetoric epistemic status.

The central difficulty lies with his formulation of the universal audience. Since I have discussed this construct at length elsewhere, I will try to be brief.[15] The problem is that Perelman imbues the universal audience with those

very qualities which he argues have so negatively influenced philosophy. Thus he says at one point that "It is the idea of self-evidence as characteristic of reason, which we must assail, if we are to make place for a theory of argumentation that will acknowledge the use of reason in directing our own actions and influencing those of others"(NR, p. 3), while elsewhere he asserts that "argument addressed to a universal audience must convince the reader that the reasons adduced are of a compelling character, that they are self-evident, and possess an absolute timeless validity, independent of local or historical contingencies"(NR, p. 32).

The resulting theoretical complications involve Perelman in a maze of contradictions. If, for example, the universal audience provides, as Perelman asserts, "a norm for objective argumentation"(NR, p. 31), and if reasons accepted by the universal audience must be self evident, then in a sense the ideal rhetoric would be no rhetoric since, as Perelman himself notes, "where rational self-evidence comes into play, the adherence of the mind seems to be suspended to a compelling truth, and no role is played by the process of argumentation"(NR, p. 32). Though he wished to break with Descartes, contradictions like this indicate that Perelman has hardly freed himself from his influence. Fortunately, these theoretical problems, articulated largely in the first and briefest section of The New Rhetoric, "The Framework of Argument," do not seriously weaken Perelman's rich and complex analysis of the pragmatics of informal argument that dominate the rest of the study. But they form a potent reminder of the difficulties involved in attempts to articulate a new rhetoric.[16]

If the greatest strength of Perelman's study lies in his detailed analysis of actual texts, and not in his theory, the situation is, in my view--and I feel myself to be on rather shaky ground here, especially with Carolyn Miller sitting next to me--at least partly reversed with Toulmin. I have admired the simplicity and systematicity of Toulmin's data-warrent-claim model for analyzing arguments. But even the discussion in his recent text, An Introduction to Reasoning (which thankfully goes beyond diagrams proving that Harry, who was born in Bermuda is a British subject or that Anne, Jack's sister, must have red hair) doesn't seem quite as rich as Perelman's.[17]

Toulmin's strength for me lies in his recognition that "we can never wholly disentangle the scientific aspects of human understanding from its philosophical aspects"(HU, p. 25). and from his broad historical perspective, conveyed so richly in his Human Understanding: The Collective Use and Evolution of Concepts. Such a perspective undoubtedly comes more naturally to a philosopher of science, one attempting to explain major, and sometimes quite sudden, evolutionary shifts, than to a judicial philosopher, like Perelman, who might quite understandably view change as an almost natural accretion of rulings and laws. Perelman analyzes texts; Toulmin analyzes the way concepts arise, evolve, and are replaced, focusing on "the developing interactions between Man, his concepts, and the world in which he lives"(HU, p. 21). Both perspectives are needed if we are to achieve a full understanding of the relationship between language and knowledge, an understanding essential to the establishment of a new rhetoric.

I hope it is clear that in stressing the value of studies of the historical relationship between rhetoric and philosophy and of the nature

of philosophical argument I do not intend to disvalue other contemporary strategies for addressing the complex issue of rhetoric's epistemic status. These two approaches have helped me to test and orient my own ideas by providing essential contexts and questions--hard questions--that have challenged and refocused my own way of thinking about rhetoric. They have also helped me to understand, as I noted earlier, that rhetoric, philosophy, literary criticism, linguistics, and a number of other disciplines, all of which focus on the nature of language, share--or could share--a strong interdisciplinary core of concerns and questions. If, in recognizing this, the new rhetoric is able to encourage the development of such an interdisciplinary base, if it is able to encourage scholars in different disciplines with different methodologies and projects to talk with one another, it will have achieved a great deal more than its own revitalization.

Notes

[1] Walter M. Carlton, "What is Rhetorical Knowledge?: A Response to Farrell--and More." QJS, 64 (1978), 313.

[2] We have discussed this issue in two related articles: "On Distinctions Between Classical and Modern Rhetoric" in Robert J. Connors, Lisa S. Ede and Andrea A. Lunsford, Eds. Essays on Classical Rhetoric and Modern Discourse (Carbondale, Il.: Southern Illinois Press, 1984) and "Classical Rhetoric, Modern Rhetoric, and Contemporary Discourse Studies," Written Communication: A Quarterly Journal of Research, Theory, and Application, 1 (January 1984), 78-99.

[3] Robert Scott, "On Viewing Rhetoric as Epistemic, Central States Speech Journal (CSSJ), 18 (February 1967), 9-16; Robert Scott, "On Viewing Rhetoric as Epistemic: Ten Years Later," CSSJ, 27 (Winter 1976), 258-266; Richard Cherwitz, "Rhetoric as 'A Way of Knowing': An Attenuation of the Epistemological Claims of the 'New Rhetoric,'" Southern Speech Communication Journal (SSCJ), 42 (Spring 1977), 207-219; Thomas Farrell, "Knowledge, Consensus, and Rhetorical Theory," QJS, 62 (February 1976), 1-14. See also: Walter M. Carleton, "What is Rhetorical Knowledge?" cited above; Thomas B. Farrell, "Social Knowledge II," QJS, 64 (1978), 329-334; C. Jack Orr, "How Shall We Say: 'Reality is Socially Constructed Through Communication?," CSSJ, 29 (Winter 1978), 1-16; Earl Croasmun and Richard A. Cherwitz, "Beyond Rhetorical Relativism," QJS, 68 (February 1982), 1-16.

[4] Barry Brummett, "Some Implications of 'Process' or 'Intersubjectivity': Postmodern Rhetoric," Philosophy and Rhetoric (P&R), 9 (1976), 21-51; Thomas Sloan, "Hermeneutics: The Interpreter's House Revisited," QJS, 57 (1971), 102-07; J. A. Campbell, "Hans-Georg Gadamer's Truth and Method," QJS, 64 (1978), 101-109; Leonard C. Hawes, "Toward a Hermeneutic Phenomenology of Communication," Communication Quarterly, 25 (1977), 30-41. See also: Stanley Deetz, "Words Without Things: Toward a Social Phenomenology of Language," QJS, 59 (February 1973, 40-51; Michael J. Hyde and Craig R. Smith, "Hermeneutics and Rhetoric: A Seen But Unobserved Relationship," QJS, 65 (December 1979), 347-363; Barbara Warnick, "Structuralism Vs. Phenomenology: Implications for Rhetorical Criticism," QJS, 65 (1979), 250-61; Barry Brummett, "A Defense of Ethical Relativism as Rhetorically Grounded, Western Journal of Speech Communication (WJSC), 45 (Fall 1981), 286-298; Allan G. Gross, "Analogy and Intersubjectivity: Political Oratory, Scholarly Argument and Scientific Reports," QJS, 69 (1983), 37-46; Thomas M. Seebohm,"The Problem of Hermeneutics in Recent Anglo-American Literature: Part I," P&R, 10 (Summer 1977), 180-198; Part II, P&R, 10 (Fall 1977), 263-275.

[5] See, for example: Lloyd F. Bitzer, "The Rhetorical Situation," P&R, 1 (January 1968), 1-14; Richard E. Vatz, "The Myth of the Rhetorical Situation," P&R, 6 (Summer 1973), 154-161; Scott Consigny, "Rhetoric and Its Situations," P&R, 7 (Summer 1974), 175-186; Kathleen M. Hall Jamieson, "Generic Constraints and the Rhetorical Situation," P&R, 7 (Summer 1974), 162-170; David M. Hunsaker and Craig R. Smith, "The Nature of Issues: A Constructive Approach to Situational Rhetoric," WSCJ, 40 (Summer 1976), 144-156; David S. Kaufer, "Point of View in Rhetorical Situation: Classical and Romantic Contrasts and Contemporary Implications," QJS, 65 (April 1979), 171-186; John H. Patton, "Causation and Creativity in Rhetorical Situation: Distinctions and Implications," QJS, 65 (1979), 36-55; Lloyd F. Bitzer, "Rhetoric and Public Knowledge," in Don M. Burks, Ed. Rhetoric, Philosophy, and Literature: An Exploration (West Lafeyette, IN.: Purdue University Press, 1978, pp. 67-94.

[6] Richard L. Johannesen, "The Emerging Concept of Communication as Dialogue," QJS, 57 (December 1971), 373-382; John Poulakos, "The Components of Dialogue," WJSC, 38 (Summer 1974), 199-212; John Stewart, "Foundations of Dialogic Communication," QJS, 64 (1978), 183-201. See also: Roderick P. Hart and Don M. Burks, "Rhetorical Sensitivity and Social Interaction," QJS, 39 (June 1972), 75-91; Lloyd S. Pettigrew, "Psychoanalytic Theory: A Neglected Rhetorical Dimension," P&R, 10 (Winter 1977), 46-59; Ronald C. Arnett, "Toward a Phenomenological Dialogue," WJSC, 45 (Summer 1981), 201-212. I have discussed the relationship of this research with arguments in composition studies advocating Rogerian rhetoric in "Is Rogerian Rhetoric Really Rogerian?," Rhetoric Review, forthcoming.

[6a] Samuel Ijsseling, Rhetoric and Philosophy in Conflict (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1976); Vasile Florescu, "Rhetoric and Its Rehabilitation in Contemporary Philosophy," P&R, 3 (Fall 1970), 193-224; Ernesto Grassi, "Rhetoric and Philosophy," P&R, 9 (Fall 1976), 200-216; Ernesto Grassi, "Can Rhetoric Provide a New Basis for Philosophizing the Humanist Tradition (Part I), P&R, 11 (Winter 1978), 1-17; Part II, P&R, 11 (Spring 1978), 76-97. See also: Anthony J. Cascardi, "The Place of Language in Philosophy; or, the Uses of Rhetoric," P&R, 16 (Fall 1983), 217-227.

[7] Plato. Gorgias, Trans. Walter Hamilton (New York: Penguin Books, 1960). Plato's view of rhetoric in the Phaedrus is, of course, much more complex.

[8] Cited in Vasile Florescu, "Rhetoric and Its Rehabilitation in Contemporary Philosophy," pp. 195-196.

[9] Richard Rorty, Ed. The Linguistic Turn: Recent Essays in Philosophical Method (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), p. 1. Vico, Dewey, and Heidegger, among others, represent exceptions to this tradition.

[10] As I hope will be clear, I do not intend to argue that only the relationship between rhetoric and philosophy is important. A vital rhetoric should rest on a broad interdisciplinary base, including such areas as linguistics, anthropology, learning theory, and history.

[11] Henry Johnstone, Jr. Validity and Rhetoric in Philosophical Argument: An Outlook in Transition (University Park, PA: The Dialogue Press of Man & World, 1978). This and subsequent references to this work will be cited in the text by the abbreviation VRPA and the page number.

[12] Walter M. Carleton, "Theory Transformation in Communication: The CAse of Henry Johnstone," QJS, 61 (February 1957), 76-88. (Johnstone's response to Carlton follows.)

[13] Stephen Toulmin. Human Understanding: The Collective Use and Evolution of Concepts (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972). This and subsequent references to this work will be cited in the text by the abbreviation HU and the page number.

[14] Ch. Perelman and L. Olbrechts-Tyteca. The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation. Trans. John Wilkinson and Purcell Weaver (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1969). This and subsequent references to this work will be cited in the text by the abbreviation NR and the page number.

[15] Lisa Ede, "Rhetoric Versus Philosophy: The Role of the Universal Audience in Chaim Perelman's The New Rhetoric," CSSJ, 32 (Summer 1981), 118-125.

[16] In his summary of his work written for The Great Ideas Today, Perelman provides a possible motive for his development of the universal audience--to establish a firm ethical standard for rhetoric. He notes: "By thus generalizing the audience [via the universal] audience , we can ward off Plato's attack against the rhetoricians for showing greater concern for success than for truth." Chaim Perelman, "The New Rhetoric: A Theory of Practical Reasoning." The Great Ideas Today: 1970 (Chicago: Encyclopedia Brittanica, 1970), p. 286.

[17] Stephen Toulmin, Richard Rieke, and Allan Janik. An Introduction to Reasoning (New York: Macmillan, 1979). Toulmin uses the Harry and Anne examples throughout his earlier discussion in The Uses of Argument (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958).